

A photograph of a truck on a road, completely obscured by a massive, towering load of hay bales. The hay is secured with ropes and straps. In the background, other vehicles are visible on the road, and a railway crossing is on the left. The scene illustrates the concept of being 'overloaded' or 'under pressure'.

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# NOOIT MEER TE DRUK

Nieuwe technieken voor meer overzicht,  
meer focus en meer impact!

10



**COLUMNS VAN  
TONY CRABBE**

# 10 COLUMNS VAN TONY CRABBE

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# WHY ARE YOU SO BUSY?

## 'HOW ARE YOU?'

If you answered 'busy' (or words to that effect) you'd be part of the majority. Everywhere we look, be it our colleagues, our friends, or our family, they are all busy. There are some very good, objective reasons for this busyness. In addition, however, busy can be thought of a lifestyle choice. I am here to argue the case for not being busy.

## BUSY AS A BRAND

It's hard to explain the race to turn on phones and PDAs as a plane lands as describing the objective need each person has to collect their emails or messages. Busy has become a demonstration of our importance to the world around. Busy is aspirational. Busy is a brand.

## BUSY AS AN EXCUSE

As we interact with those around us we constantly go through a process of identity negotiation. This process helps both parties to get to know each other, but also to understand what we can expect from each other. Busy has become a wonderful way to reduce social obligations. After all, 'I'm

sorry I'm busy' means, more or less, 'Go away and leave me alone' (just not quite in those words!).

## BUSY AS ENTERTAINMENT (OR ADDICTION)

Perhaps the most powerful driver of busy is the desire for stimulation, for entertainment. It drives us to fill our time, staying connected at all times, revelling in our productivity. Busy can be quite a buzz. In fact, busy can be addictive. Edward Hallowell and John Ratey from Harvard have found that feeling constantly connected via phone and email provides something like the 'dopamine squirt' provided by addictive drugs.

## WHY IS THIS A PROBLEM?

The brain is simply not built for constant busyness. Gary Small, professor of psychiatry at UCLA, comments that while there can be a short term boost in energy and memory from busyness, long term it can lead to depression and impaired cognition. I'm with T.E. Lawrence when he said 'Mankind has been no gainer by its drudges'. In a world overloaded with activity and information we don't need

more 'doing', but more integration, more intellectual ambling, more sense making. In short, more thinking.

Oscar Wilde bemoaned the fact that people kept asking 'What are you doing these days?'. Even in his days he felt there was too much focus on activity over reflection. He felt the only civilised question to ask any educated person was 'What are you thinking?'. Busy is not just a result of the demands on you, busy is a choice. So is thinking.

So...what are you thinking? ■

I am here  
to argue the  
case for not  
being busy.

# EMBARRASSED ABOUT BEING BUSY

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Most of us today lead hectic lives, crunching through emails, racing between meetings and juggling competing demands. Overwhelmed by it all, our busyness can come to dominate our work, lives and relationships. Yet, however much we have to do, I don't think our workload explains how often we tell people we're busy. I think there is more at play here.

## HELPLESS VICTIMS

The first possible explanation for our tireless desire to discuss our exhaustion is the need for acknowledgement. We live in a world of too much demand: our organizations demand more from us; our families want more from us; we are always on the go, and always on call. Despite our heroic efforts, we can't escape the feeling that we're not achieving as we'd hoped at work; we feel guilty that we're not the parent or partner we want to be; and disappointed that our lives have become so frenetically humdrum. We are helpless victims and we just want to be heard: we want our super-human endeavours recognized and our failings understood in the context of the impossibility of the challenge. I think we've got it wrong. We think we're

so busy because there's too much to do. It is true that there are huge pressures on our time and attention. If we just take email: in the time it has taken you to read this post, 100 million emails have been sent. Today, a quarter of a million people will start using email for the first time, adding their voice to the white noise bombarding us all.

In the face of the ever-increasing information tsunami, it is impossible to even scratch the surface of all the things we could or should do on any given day. As the demands continue to increase, so our activity and urgency increases. However, to explain our busyness on the basis of how much stuff there is to do, is like deciding how much to eat by the size of the buffet table; it's dumb. More importantly, it's an abdication of our ability to make choices. If we start from the assumption that we can't do it all, we should be making tough choices over what we'll do, and how much.

We have to ask ourselves why the only choice we're making is to try and do as much as possible. In choosing relentless busyness, we are unchoosing a lot of the things that could help us to succeed and be happy: time to think, space to create

and unpolluted moments of shared attention with loved ones. Busyness isn't inevitable, it's a bad choice.

## BUSY IS A BRAND

The second possible explanation for our desire to shout about our busyness is that we think it's cool. In an extensive analysis of holiday greetings cards, Ann Burnett was interested in how people summarized their year to friends and family. She found that people didn't simply explain what they had done, they bragged about busyness, they even competed to be the busiest.

This holds true in my own life too. I don't know about you, but I find it really annoying when I've just told a friend about how busy I am (expecting praise, admiration or sympathy), when they out-busy me: they describe a week more crammed and crazy than mine! Somewhere deep down, I feel a little less vital and important.

But busy is far from cool. In fact, the frenetic, hop-scotching activity that makes up the majority of busyness could be seen as a form of avoidance or even procrastination. The work that will make the most difference or be most rewarding

No organization is changed through achieving an empty inbox or a fully ticked to-do list.

is also the activity that gets squeezed out by busyness: things that require sustained, singular focus. Our rush to do lots of things, means we often neglect the few big activities that are most important or rewarding. No organization is changed through achieving an empty inbox or a fully ticked to-do list. Email and other 'busy activity' helps us to feel like we're being productive but does little to move our organizations or our lives forward.

As T.E. Lawrence said 'Mankind has been no gainer by its drudges'; great work and lives will not result from becoming busy drones, skittering between multiple tasks, but from deep immersion in the few. So next time you find yourself explaining how busy you are; I hope you feel a little embarrassed. Busy is a bad choice and it isn't cool. ■

# TIME MANAGEMENT DOESN'T WORK

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"Tess...started her way up the dark and crooked lane not made for hasty progress; a street laid out before inches of land had value, and when one-handed clocks sufficiently sub-divided the day" (Thomas Hardy).

Imagine your life without time; without a constant sense that you're running behind, frustrated that, yet again you are losing the battle against the irresistible force of the ticking clock. Imagine not wishing there were more hours in the day. We haven't always been obsessed with time. In fact, as the historian EP Thompson highlighted half a century ago, before the Industrial Revolution clocks were largely irrelevant. Instead of a time orientation, people had a task orientation. They had jobs to do, and so they did them in the natural order, at the natural time.

This worked for a largely agricultural society. However, the factories of the Industrial Revolution needed to coordinate hundreds of people, to get them working at the same time, in synchronicity; and that required clocks. So business leaders imposed clock time on their workforce (not without resistance); and eminent leaders, such as Benjamin Franklin, reinforced the

value of this with statements such as 'time is money'.

Cast the clock forward 250 years, and we're all obsessed with time. We don't need managers to impose time discipline upon us, we do it ourselves because we're so busy. It seems the only option in the face of the demand and expectation tsunami hitting us each day. So we schedule and cram our time, squeezing all the efficiency we can out of each day. Time management, we believe, is the solution to our busyness: if we could organize our time better we'd be less overwhelmed, happier and we'd be more effective. We are completely wrong on all three counts; and it's damaging our lives and our careers.

## TIME MANAGEMENT ONLY MAKES YOU BUSIER

Research does show that, if you increase a people's time awareness – such as by placing a big clock in front of them – they do more stuff (think about how much work you get done on the last day before your holiday). It makes logical sense that, by getting more done, we'd be likely to feel more in control.

More than that, it is one of the great fanta-

sies of time management: if you get more organized you will get on top. However, that only works in a finite world. We haven't lived in that world for quite a while. In our infinite world, we will never be able to get on top of everything, ever again; there is just too much to do.

In Greek mythology, when you cut off one of Hydra's heads, two would grow back. Like the Hydra, all that happens when we do a lot of things, is more things appear to take their place (send more emails; get more replies). In essence, if we do more as a result of managing our time better, we don't get it all done, we just become busier.

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## MAXIMIZING YOUR TIME MEANS FRACTURING YOUR ATTENTION

Armed with our gadgets, we have never been better equipped to 'maximize our time'. Our ever-present phones allow us to fill all our time productively, to communicate real-time and to juggle multiple tasks, swatting away incoming demands like some super-charged task-ninja; potent and efficient.

As we seek to maximize our time, we slice and dice it into ever-smaller increments. This leads to what Brigid Schulte calls time-splintering. However, the real impact isn't on our time but on our attention. When we scatter our attention across a thousand micro-activities, we prevent ourselves from engaging deeply or thinking properly.

Life-enhancing conversations with loved ones are disembowelled with frequent 'productive' glances at the inbox; our ability to think is decimated by the distraction of the ping and the ring. We maintain a state of chaotic mental activity that Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi called psychic entropy. This is the opposite of the optimal psychological state of flow, where attention is allowed to linger, to sink into an activity without distraction, where we bring our

# We need more thinking, more creativity and more problem solving. A focus on time will undermine all of these.

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thoughts, actions and goals into perfect synchronicity for extended periods. Flow doesn't happen in splinters of time; but in great big lumps of attention. Think about your last few weeks. All the moments you had of real insight or happiness came from times when you sank your attention, with reckless abandon, into the moment and the activity. In fact, one of the very features of flow is a loss of the sense of time. In maximizing our time, we rob our moments of their color.

## **TIME AWARENESS MAKES US LESS EFFECTIVE**

Having heard all this you may still be thinking that you'd be willing to feel busier and less happy as long as you could be effective. Unfortunately time management hinders our performance in this area too. Effectiveness comes from two core abilities: prioritization and achievement. When we prioritize well, we choose to do the right things, not just the obvious things. Yet when we have a strong time awareness, our attention narrows and so our ability to make good choices declines. We make decisions based on the immediate demand, rather than zooming out to look at the bigger picture. We prioritize

the urgent and immediate, rather than the important and strategic.

In our time-driven frenzy, our gaze seldom lifts from things like the inbox and task list. Research by Microsoft, for example, suggests that 77% of UK workers feel they have had a productive day if they have emptied their inbox. It constantly horrifies me to see the number of blogs and books which focus on the goal of getting to an empty inbox or zero tasks, as if either achievement was worthwhile. No business or life was changed by an empty inbox; and anyone who gets to zero tasks simply lacks imagination!

In addition to making bad choices, research by Michael DeDonno and Heath Demaree shows that it lowers our ability to achieve as well. They found that the very sense of time (and lack of it), rather than an actual lack of time, reduces our performance. Teresa Amabile of Harvard has also shown that increased time focus reduces our problem solving ability, and our capacity to generate imaginative solutions. We think less well when we work under the shadow of the clock.

## **THE END OF THE TIME MANAGEMENT ERA**

It is true, we will be able to do more stuff if we focus on managing our time, but in today's business environment, we don't need more repetitive, synchronised activity like we did in the Industrial Revolution. We need more thinking, more creativity and more problem solving. A focus on time will undermine all of these. It will make you feel more overwhelmed and miserable too!

Time management was a brilliant invention, and helped to transform society 250 years ago. It is just not helpful anymore; in fact it's harmful in a world of too much. It's time to develop a different strategy; one that starts from the recognition that, in our overloaded world, the greatest shortage is not time; but attention. Put another way; time is no longer money. ■

# MANAGE YOUR ATTENTION, NOT YOUR TIME

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*In an information-rich world, the wealth of information means a dearth of something else: a scarcity of whatever it is that information consumes. What information consumes is rather obvious: it consumes the attention of its recipients. Hence a wealth of information creates a poverty of attention and a need to allocate that attention efficiently.*  
(Herbert Simon, Nobel Prize Laureate)

From the Renaissance to 1900, human knowledge has doubled every century; by World War II, a doubling only took 25 years. In 2006, IBM estimated that by 2010 the world's knowledge would double every 11 hours (pdf). All this information, and similar increases in communication, have created unprecedented challenges for our brains. Overwhelmed and distracted, days pass in a blur of frenetic and relatively mindless activity; relationships get crunched into snatched moments before the screens suck us back. Our most valuable and scarce resource is no longer time—it's attention.

This article is aimed at those of us who have felt the path to achievement is to maximize our time. It outlines a few of the

simple shifts you can make to manage your attention instead. After all, it's an attention economy.

## FROM WHETHER OR NOT TO WHICH

Tim Cook described Apple as the most focused company in the world. Every day, it says no to great ideas in order to put enormous energy behind those it chooses to focus on. This is the essence of strategy: making tough decisions so you can focus attention on what matters. Psychologically that's hard, because we ask the wrong question. To illustrate this I'll explain why I don't like buffets. I find myself asking whether or not I want chicken korma, sweet and sour pork, steak pie, etc. Since I like all these foods, the answer is nearly always "yes," and I end up with an over-full plate. The same happens with the demands for our attention: we ask whether or not we should answer email, or attend that meeting. Since nearly everything in work has a value, the answer will always be "yes." So we end up with over-crammed days and stretched attention.

The question we should be asking, as Chip and Dan Heath suggest, is 'which'? Which would I prefer, korma or

pie? Which activity would be the best use of my attention? However, which is a harder question than whether or not. Research into decision-making shows the brain quickly gets tired—or ego depleted. When tired, it tends to make the easy choice, which in this case is replacing the tough which choice with whether or not. If you start your day with email and respond to messages, you are ego-depleting yourself, which can lead the tired mind to graze on whatever appears in front of it, saying yes to everything (and therefore achieving nothing).

Use your brain's freshness. Before you allow the flotsam and jetsam of daily office

life to batter your brain cells into submission, prioritize. Decide which activities will be the most valuable use of your attention that day, and then do them.

## FROM TO-DO LISTS TO BRAIN DUMPS

You could also get rid of your to-do list. If you think about the purpose of a to-do list, it's a place to capture all the stuff you might forget because it isn't important. People seldom write their biggest priorities on a to-do list.

The very act of keeping a to-do list encourages you to fritter your attention away on inconsequential things. I would never include "Write a book" or "Spend

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time with the children” on my list. I prefer to focus on the things that matter using the strategy of US Army General Rhonda Cornum: “Prioritize A. B. C. Discard C.” Your list of priorities should be very short. In fact, according to Greg McKeown, the very word ‘priority’ was a purely singular word until the early 1900s. However, from a pure attention perspective, to-do lists serve a useful purpose: they allow you to get things out of your head. The brain is pretty bad at doing more than one thing at a time. In fact, multi-tasking can reduce the ability of a Harvard MBA to that of an 8-year-old. Trying to remember things you should do consumes valuable processing power. David Allen suggests a useful alternative here that I call ‘brain dumps’. A brain dump is a notebook or phone you always have with you. Whenever you have an idea, task or concern on your mind, capture it in your brain dump.

This delegates the process of remembering to your dump and frees your attention up for the job at hand. At times of your choosing, daily or weekly, check your dump. Most items you’ll delete, some you’ll actually do, but it shouldn’t drive

your daily activity. That is driven by your core priorities, which you won’t forget.

#### FROM SWITCH TO STICK

We feel powerful as we switch between activities, responding in real-time, and rewarded with dopamine. Yet this switching increases the overall time taken to complete the tasks by 40%, due to something David Meyer calls the task-switching cost. The implication is that we increase our effectiveness when we keep our attention on a single task for longer. I call this big chunking: breaking your day into great big chunks of undisturbed attention (as compared to every three minutes, which appears to be the average in most offices). To do this, turn off your distractions. The temptation of an email notifier, or the ring of the phone, is harder to resist than sex and chocolate. Even if you do resist it, just having heard that notifier sucks some of your attention away, reducing performance.

Don’t try and resist it; avoid it. Those with exceptionally strong willpower are no better at resisting chocolate cake when it’s in front of them. However, they are much better at making sure chocolate cake never gets in their fridge.

The best way to resist the temptation of distraction is to create habits, which help you to avoid them, the simplest of which is reaching for the off switch.

#### FROM EXTERNAL TO INTERNAL

I’m with T.E. Lawrence when he said “Mankind had been no gainer by its drudges.” As we’ve scurried between inbox, calendar and to-do list, the rising tides of information have washed our attention away. We’re left with knowledge workers who don’t think and partners who aren’t present. Unless we can learn to become the masters of our attention, we will fail to escape the drudgery of a world of too much. ■



# PRODUCTIVITY IS KILLING INNOVATION AND HURTING OUR CAREERS

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There's no shortage of advice out there for making you more productive, and plenty of it works. But the emphasis on productivity has gone too far, and it's holding back not just innovation but our own careers, too.

## BE LESS PRODUCTIVE AND MORE STRATEGIC

In the 1980s, Japanese companies seemed unstoppable. They had developed fantastic improvements in productivity that helped them churn out products faster, more cheaply, and to higher standards. Yet after a decade of irresistible global domination, the tide started to turn for Japan.

By the 90s, Japan had entered a recession that lasted more than a decade, with zero growth, rising unemployment, and deflation. Other countries around the world had copied the best practices of Japanese manufacturing and destroyed Japan's competitive advantage. Productivity can provide important advantages over competitors, which can increase profitability, but it will rarely keep you ahead in the long term. Investments in new technologies can increase productivity, but best practices spread quickly,

and the immediate gains in output are soon shared by competitors, so no competitive advantage is gained, meaning no increased profit.

In fact, what tends to happen is that as all competitors get ever more productive, the investment cost in making further gains gets larger, and this eats into profits. It becomes an arms race in which everyone loses.

As individuals, our productivity has increased enormously with the arrival of each of the following: the computer, the laptop, the mobile phone, the Internet, the smartphone, and the cloud. Each of these raised performance levels by allowing us to produce more.

This has impacted our careers in three ways. First, we are all able to produce a lot more. So we do. This creates an ever-increasing amount of work for us all to do. Second, as we all use the same technology, our ability to differentiate ourselves on the basis of our productivity gets harder and harder.

Finally, any further increases we want to make in our productivity in the hope of achieving ever-smaller advantages over our competition come at an increasingly large cost.

## PLAYING THE "MORE" GAME

In the Industrial Age, the primary goal was production. Given a set level of quality, the more you could produce, the better. As time passed and production processes improved, managers started to realize the thing that was slowing output the most was the human factor. They needed their people to work harder and more efficiently.

Enter Frederick Winslow Taylor and his approach called "scientific management." Taylor analyzed employee activity with time-and-motion studies to find out where efficiencies could be made. Ever since

In doing more and more, we are thinking less and less.



then, the core focus of most management teams has been to get their people to produce more.

In a curious parallel to the Industrial Age, a recent study has looked at what's holding back the effectiveness of computer systems today. A research group at Carnegie Mellon University claims that the limiting factor for computers today isn't the processor speed or memory size or network capacity, it's the human factor again.

We are the limiting factor to progress. But this time, it isn't our efficiency or hard work that's slowing advancement, it's our (lack of) ability to focus and think. The very capability that our businesses need to cultivate is being damaged, day by day, by "more."

In our mania to squeeze ever more efficiency out of the workforce, ever more connectedness, ever more output, we have neglected the fact that our brains are not machines. In doing more and more, we are thinking less and less. Which is curious because in an information age, it's our cognitive abilities that matter—the collective intellect, imagination, and problem-solving capability of our people.

Floundering under the avalanche of corporate communication and demand, our poor brains struggle to do anything more than flit from micro-task to micro-task. We are productive but dumb; our battered and distracted attentional systems are slowing the entire system, and eroding corporate progress.

#### **"MORE" DOES LESS FOR OUR CAREERS**

From an individual perspective, we see that management wants productivity, and so realize that the more productive we are, the more valuable we are. So we all play the "More" game. The rules are simple: The people who produce the most (and are seen to be producing a lot) win. You work hard, you work long, and your bosses notice you seem to be more motivated than your colleagues. Management starts giving you more to do—more work and more responsibility. We get to a point where we are no longer competing against the unmotivated.

The "More" game can still work. If you are working with people who are much less hardworking than you, your extra efforts and productivity will be noticed and rewarded. Typically though, this only

happens at the very start of our careers. At some point, it stops working. Then we get to the point where we are no longer competing against the unmotivated; we find our fellow workers are also career-minded and playing the "More" game too! That's when the arms race starts, with email response time, working hours, and the sheer quantity of stuff produced being the criteria for success. When the "More" game doesn't bring results, we redouble our efforts trying to squeeze ever more activity, ever more output, and ever more responsiveness out of our tired brains. The quality of our thinking drops, our imagination fades, and our energy dwindles. And ever so slowly, we fade into the background. ■

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# PRODUCTIVITY THROUGH CHUNKING AND SLICING

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## HOW LONG DOES YOUR ATTENTION STAY ON ONE THING AT WORK?

One study found that office workers switch task every three minutes. You're working on a project and 'ping' an email arrives. You leap into action and deal with the email before returning to the project... then an IM pops onto your screen.

It feels good swatting away all those incoming demands, like some task-juggling Jedi: the brain rewards bouncing between tasks with a release of dopamine. The more we hopscotch, the more effective we feel.

However this feeling of effectiveness is misplaced. Each time you switch tasks the brain has to re-orientate itself to the rules of the new task. In fact, switching backwards and forwards between tasks has been shown to increase the time taken to complete both tasks by 40%.

So, anyone habitually bouncing between activities, who allows themselves to be tempted by the 'ping', could be losing two hours of raw productivity each day

## BIG CHUNK YOUR TIME

The impact of switching tasks on productivity is seen most strongly for more intellectually demanding activities such as

problem solving, prioritizing or planning. Your brain needs more time to get into gear, to grapple with the issues. Think of it like a new job. If you have been employed to perform a simple task, you will probably get up to speed pretty quickly. However, take on a big role and you simply won't be able to add value for months.

If you switch tasks before you have got fully up to speed, you are losing significant efficiency

I worked with a Brazilian VP in a major multinational who was taking on his first role in the Asia Pacific Region. He spent his first three months doing nothing except chatting and learning. He recognized he needed time to understand before he could perform.

Big, complex tasks are the same: you need time to kick the issues around be-

fore you can deliver value. If you switch tasks before you have got fully up to speed, you are losing significant efficiency. Big tasks need big chunks of time. So, when you are working on that big task today... shut off your distractions to reduce the temptation to hop, skip and jump away from productive focus

## ARE THIN SLICES EVER GOOD FOR BIG TASKS?

In 1927, a Gestalt psychologist called Bluma Zeigarnik was sat in a Vienna coffee house with a bunch of friends. They ordered a few rounds of drinks, yet the waiter never wrote down their order. Intrigued by this, after the bill was paid and the group had left the coffee house, Zeigarnik returned. On questioning the waiter, she found that he no longer could recall what her group had drunk.

One way of interpreting this is that the brain works with open and closed files. Once the bill had been paid, the waiter closed the file and forgot. This has become known as the Zeigarnik effect (and people tend to be twice as likely to remember things in open files than in closed ones).

I use the Zeigarnik Effect slightly differ-

ently. If I have a big task to do, one that requires creativity or deep thought, I'll deliberately 'open the file' a few days before I actually want to do the work. In practice this simply involves starting to work on the problem for about 20 minutes, possibly in the form of a mindmap. I then leave my subconscious to work its magic. When I finally begin to work on the task in earnest, my thinking and ideas flow.

What file should you leave open today? ■

# E-MAIL IS THE TV OF WORK



It can feel good to flop in front of the TV at the end of a busy day. With a simple click you are transported and entertained. You can switch off your brain. The same is true at work. It feels good to flop in front of your screen and with a click disappear into your messages.

As you plug into your inbox, you can switch off and pass the time away. All your replies, CCs and emoticons are a welcome distraction from real thinking. Email isn't work; it's light entertainment.

If TV and email are light relief from the big demands we face today, is a bit of chill out time in front of our screens so bad? The thing is, most of us aren't just spending a 'bit' of time: the average American spends 5 hours a day watching TV. That's over 2 months a year!

The average British worker feels they've had a good day if all they have done is empty their inbox! Chilling on this scale is costly. For one thing, the average psychological state while watching TV is mildly depressed!

The ancient Greeks had it right: they believed that leisure should be effortful, and separated leisure from relaxation. More modern research into happiness shows we are much more likely to expe-

rience happiness at work than at home, because at work we are stretched and challenged.

When you reflect on your last few weeks, the vast majority of the times you felt really happy would have been when you were exerting effort: learning something, immersed in a hobby, playing sport or elbow deep in a great conversation.

We are happiest when we are putting effort in; in work and at home. It will always be easier and more appealing to flop into outlook than grapple with that hard project, the one where you don't even know where to start. However, real satisfaction and success is never to be found in electronic chit chat; but in sustained effort and focus on the problems that matter in your work.

So, go ahead, dive into your email, but don't fool yourself. It's not really work. It's not even leisure. It's reality TV. ■

Email isn't work; it's light entertainment.



# HOT E-MAILS AND EMOTIONAL CONTROL

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**Abraham Lincoln got mad at times. When he did, he had an interesting technique to deal with it.**

He'd write what he called a 'hot letter'. In an article published yesterday in the New York Times, Maria Konnikova describes how Lincoln, for example, wrote a hot letter to General George C. Meade to express his fury and frustration that he'd allowed Robert E. Lee to escape Gettysburg. He would pour all his bile into these letters, then mark them 'Never sent. Never signed.'

Organizations are emotion-soaked places these days. As we scramble in our headlong quest for personal productivity, we inevitably bump and even collide with others whose aims aren't perfectly aligned with ours. As we race to get it all done, small obstacles get magnified by our urgency and anxiety, and we can over-react. In short, we're flustered and so we fluster others. Yet, as the challenges and demands of organizational life continue to increase, we need to learn to manage our emotions better; to stay calm and focused no matter what is happening around us. Which brings me back to Lincoln's letters. As I read Konnikova's article I came up

with an idea: how about setting up a 'hot email' alias. Effectively create an email account which you, and only you, have access to. Whenever you are angry or upset with anyone, unreservedly pile your angst into an email and send to your new alias.

Why does this help? I think there are three reasons this could be beneficial. The first and obvious one is that, after writing your hot email, you can then come back to it the following day and more dispassionately decide what you want to send. Relationships are vital in our highly-matrixed organizations, so an overnight pause to reconsider what you want to say can save a lot of time and energy later in rebuilding trust.

The second reason is focus. When we are in the throes of anger or frustration, our limbic system fires up and valuable mental resources are diverted away from the pre-frontal cortex. In short, we become more stupid and less able to focus when we're hot and bothered. We lose time we simply haven't got to spare. Research has consistently shown that writing about our emotions is an efficient method to diffuse extreme feelings to regain focus and calm. A few minutes

blasting someone in an email (to our hot email address) could save hours of unproductive festering.

Finally, there has been a lot of research on the benefits of mindfulness for well-being, creativity and effectiveness. One of the central aspects of mindfulness is the ability to observe your thoughts and reactions to events, rather than being hooked emotionally by them. If we can understand how we get 'hooked' better, we can observe when this happens and learn to stay calm more often.

If we begin a practice of sending our hot emails to a particular email address, we are effectively building up a record of

what causes us to lose emotional control. I think that as we read our history of vitriolic outbursts, not only would they be hilarious in retrospect, we can learn a lot about ourselves.

We can learn to be more mindful of our reactions, to choose different responses in the moment and so stay more focused and effective more often.

What will you call your hot email alias? ■

Organizations are emotion-soaked places these days.

# STRATEGIC IDLENESS



In a recent survey in the US, 83% of people said they had no time for 'relaxation or thinking' at all. In a knowledge economy, what hope can we have as individuals or as corporations if we're not thinking. More specifically, there's a type of thinking that is more under threat than any other kind: the thinking that happens when we're relaxed or idle.

Martin Heidegger made the distinction between calculative and meditative thinking. Calculative thinking is focused, activity-driven and outcome-oriented; meditative thinking is more relaxed, internal and expansive. When we're busy, we employ calculative thinking. When we're consuming reality TV or YouTube videos of dancing cats, we're not really thinking at all.

Meditative thinking only happens when we are neither producing nor consuming; in other words, when we are idle. My concern is that the twin drives to produce and consume are squeezing idleness out of our lives; and idleness is important because it is the origin of meditative thinking.

So why is meditative thinking under threat? Everyone is busy these days. It's easy to justify busyness on the basis of all

the demands on our time and attention. But there is another possible reason for our incessant activity.

Psychologist Christopher Hsee ran a couple of experiments which led him to suggest that a lot of our busyness could be driven by an aversion to idleness; and as long as we have the mildest excuse to be active, we will choose activity over idleness. In fact, one study even found that people would rather subject themselves to electric shocks than be left for 6-15 minutes of idleness, or 'thinking time'. In everyday life, we don't need to resort to such shocking tactics; we simply need to reach for our ever-present smartphones. So we blot out our mental ruminations, escaping even the shortest moments of inactivity by plunging into production or consumption.

To fight this trend I want to provide the justification for doing nothing; for wandering off into our thoughts. More specifically, I want to show the vital role idleness plays in our strategic thinking: whether that thinking is applied in our lives, careers or businesses. Meditative thinking is deeply strategic.

## IDLENESS AND LEARNING

Great strategic thinking comes from insight, not data; and idleness fosters this insight. I see too many ambitious people consuming information, blogs and ideas in any spare time they have to learn or make big decisions. But without the idle time to ponder and digest, they don't really learn or make sense of the input; at best they retain it.

We prime ourselves for great strategic thinking not when we take in great content, but when we integrate that with our previous knowledge, beliefs and experiences. In this process, we not only join new ideas with existing ones; but new

information acts like a bridge joining previously unconnected strands of thought together. The meditative mind plays at the intersection of the new and the existing; allowing real integration and insight.

## IDLENESS AND BIG AND CREATIVE THINKING

There is an interesting conundrum to the way the mind works: most of the really big, strategic problems in our business and our lives will only be solved through idleness. When we get stuck on a problem, we are stuck in a single 'problem frame'.

The solution comes only when we start

When we are idle,  
our thoughts can make  
weird and wonderful  
connections in the brain



thinking about the problem in totally different ways. Yet, the harder we focus on a problem, the more our attention narrows; and the more we become fixed in a single view. Famously, Sir Isaac Newton, Archimedes and Rene Descartes all solved their big problems in moments of idleness.

When we are idle, our thoughts zoom out, ambling more expansively around the issue. It is through the broader and wider ramble of the idle mind that we are most likely to see the big picture and solve the big problems.

#### **IDLENESS AND DIFFERENTIATION**

Michael Porter claims the heart of any sustainable advantage does not come from productivity, but from differentiation. I would argue this applies at a corporate level, and at a career level.

Differentiation requires an ability to come up with entirely different strategies and solutions to everyone else. In other words, differentiation requires creativity; and great creative ideas come from idleness. For example, as Daniel Goleman notes, it wasn't during a strategy session that Marc Benioff dreamed up the idea for Salesforce.com, but on a month-long holiday in Hawaii.

When we are idle, our thoughts can make weird and wonderful connections in the brain; connections and patterns of ideas form that are simply not possible from a more logical, focused form of thinking.

#### **MORE PRODUCTIVE IDLENESS**

**Digest** what you consume: develop a practice that whenever you have consumed valuable information, take some idle time, away from people and devices; give your brain the chance to make sense of it, play with it and integrate it. Research shows we can accelerate our digestion by gently, but deliberately meditating on the topic we've just consumed, allowing the mind to wander and play with the ideas.

**Intellectual ambling:** It seems the best form of mind wandering, especially for incubation of problems or ideas, is when we combine mental idleness with the mildest form of activity, like a gentle walk. I call this intellectual ambling. It seems the act of physically wandering helps the mind to wander, and so solve more problems.

**Dead time:** Life is full of moments which were always considered 'dead time': the walk to the station or the doctor's waiting room. This dead time may have felt

irritating, but it created space in our lives for meditative thinking.

The next time life creates an opportunity for dead time, seize it with both hands. Leave your phone in your pocket, the radio off, and allow your idle mind to wander, to experiment and to be brilliant. ■

The quality  
of our  
thinking  
drops, our  
imagination  
fades, and  
our energy  
dwindles.

# TAKING THE RISK TO MOVE BEYOND BUSY

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There's a lot of insecurity in the job market these days, so it's natural to want to play it safe; and the safest option is normally to do what everyone else is doing. To hide ourselves in the herd. So what does this mean? It means to cram our days with activity, to respond instantly to every message and request; to be always on and always available. To race from meeting to meeting, proclaiming in our body language or our conversations how busy we are; because that's what everyone else is doing. Anything less would make us stand out; anything less would expose us and put us at risk. Yet endless, frenetic activity is not good for your wellbeing or your career (even if it feels safer). However, whether you believe this or not, if you want to move beyond busyness you have to deal with the risk. In this, I think we can learn a lot from other areas of risk research.

## HOW DO WE 'CHOOSE' WHAT RISK TO TAKE?

You're a smoker. Or at least you were. On the strong advice of your doctor, following endless nicotine patches, you've succeeded in giving up. Congratulations! Your risk of developing any of a host

of smoking-related illnesses has just dropped dramatically.

You might also expect your life expectancy to increase. The news is a little less good there. In fact, one study showed that those who had given up smoking actually died a little sooner than those who continued.

In flood-ravaged countries in the developing world, when you build a levee you can significantly reduce the risk of flooding. However, research shows that, despite the success of the levees, the actual number of flood victims remains about the same. Why?

These results can be explained by something the Canadian Psychologist Gerald J.S. Wilde called Risk Homeostasis. Homeostasis is the process in biology which keeps things about the same.

Think of your body temperature. You have a normal temperature of 37.0 °C (98.6 °F). When your core temperature rises, you start sweating and blood flows to the surface of your skin to cool you down. When your temperature cools below 37.0, you start shivering to generate heat. Risk homeostasis works like this. We all have a level of preferred risk. This varies between people but stays the same for

any given person over time. Fairly obviously, if we are in a situation of higher risk than our preference, we act to reduce the risk. More surprisingly, if the risk is lower than our preference, we also act; this time to increase our risk.

This was most powerfully demonstrated in a taxi fleet in Munich. Half the fleet were equipped with ABS (anti-lock braking system). Half the fleet had conventional brakes. ABS makes the car safer by reducing skidding under braking.

However, the number of accidents in those using ABS was the same as those using conventional brakes. Drivers with ABS could recognize their cars were safer, so what did they do? They responded by driving more dangerously to increase the risk back to their preferred level.

This effect was nicely used by Volvo, who are well known for building a brand around safety. This was a very successful strategy in the 70s and 80s, but became a less potent proposition into the 90s as all cars got safer.

Volvo asked themselves the question: why do you want to be safe? The answer they came to is that having a safer car allows you to do more dangerous things. The resulting adverts showed



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Volvos driving through volcanoes and ice fields. This was risk homeostasis in action. So when a successful drink-driving campaign in British Colombia reduced alcohol-related accidents over a four month period by 18%, it should come as no surprise that accidents that were not alcohol-related increased by 19%.

Or that smokers who quit, simply increased their other non-healthy behaviors. Or that people living in areas which are less prone to flooding due to levees increasingly build houses on the more fertile, more risky, flood plains.

On a personal note, my wife and I often commented that whenever our lives seemed to be 'settling down', we would do something which dramatically destabilized everything again. What we didn't realize at the time is that we were simply finding our way back to our preferred level of risk.

The lesson from this is to be mindful about your risk-related choices. Like so many areas of human judgment, these decisions about adjusting risk are not explicit, conscious decisions. The taxi drivers will not have thought 'Oh, I'm a little safe in this car...better change that!' Yet having successful careers involves a degree of risk.

To deliberately focus on something that will make a dramatic impact on your organization necessarily means you let something else slip; and that is a risk. I would strongly argue this is a risk worth taking: too many of us ceaselessly try and keep everyone happy, avoiding the risk of letting people down.

In doing this, we get swamped in a thousand-and-one micro tasks instead of focusing on the important areas of our work and lives. We avoid the many small risks by trying to do everything; and in so doing we unconsciously accept the big risk that we'll have uninspiring careers and unfulfilling lives.

What all this means is that if you want to plot a life beyond crazy busyness, you should do two things to allow yourself to take the risks you need to in order to focus.

Firstly, create the capability and motivation for risk by increasing your sense of safety in other areas of your life.

Secondly, pay a lot more attention to the big, unspoken risk of a life wasted; and in focusing on this, make it feel okay to swap the many small risks for the one big one. ■

Too many of us ceaselessly try and keep everyone happy, avoiding the risk of letting people down.

# OVER HET SEMINAR NOOIT MEER TE DRUK

## Bikkelen met de kraan open

Je draait overuren. Je bikkelt. Je buffelt. Maar wat je ook doet, je inbox en to-do-lijst zijn nooit leeg. En je hebt nooit écht tijd voor jezelf. Je bent niet alleen: onderzoek toont aan dat 60% van alle werknemers gebukt gaat onder flinke werkdruk, maar iedereen bijt even door. Hopen op rust en overzicht. Ooit ...

## Timemanagement is een schijnoplossing

Je doet je best. Je probeerde al eens een handige 'lifestyling' app, je deed al eens een cursus timemanagement, maar het helpt niet. Het zijn schijnoplossingen. Je weet: het moet anders.

## Vanaf nu: Nooit meer te druk!

Bestsellerauteur Tony Crabbe geeft je in dit seminar eindelijk het échte antwoord. Hij laat zien hoe je écht goede keuzes maakt, taken verstrekkend delegeert en je aandacht optimaal gebruikt. Met als gevolg: rust in je hoofd. Overzicht in het werk. En toch een hoge productiviteit. Dat kan!

## PROGRAMMA 7 februari 2019

### BLOK 1: De druk van de ketel

*Tony Crabbe*

- Waarom zijn we druk?
- Waarom werkt tijdmanagement niet?
- Hoe weersta je continue prikkels?

*Margriet Sitskoorn*

- Een rondleiding door je brein: wat doet werkdruk?
- Hoe haal je alles uit je hersenen?

### BLOK 3: De praktische gids

*Tony Crabbe*

- Alle handvaten voor meer rust en geluk.
- Slimme manieren om geluksmomentjes te creëren.
- Beter balanceren tussen werk en alles daarbuiten.

### BLOK 2: Radicaal slimmere oplossingen

*Tony Crabbe*

- Stop met productiever en efficiënter willen zijn.
- Nieuwe manieren om jezelf te onderscheiden.

*Wouter de Jong*

- Neemt je mee naar de sportschool: de 'mindgym'.
- Leert je de belangrijkste mentale workouts om meer rust in je hoofd te creëren.

HÉT  
ANTI TIMEMANAGEMENT  
SEMINAR

WWW.DENKPRODUCTIES.NL



## DE EXPERTS

**Tony Crabbe** schreef dé bestseller over zelfleiderschap van dit jaar: Nooit meer te druk. Crabbe werkt in het dagelijks leven als bedrijfspsycholoog voor bedrijven als Microsoft, Disney, Salesforce en de World Bank. Daarnaast is hij als honorair wetenschappelijk onderzoeker verbonden aan de Universiteit van Londen.

**Magriet Sitskoorn** is hoogleraar klinische neuropsychologie aan de Universiteit van Tilburg. Ze onderzoekt hoe gedrag en omgeving invloed op de hersenen uitoefenen. Sitskoorn is ook de auteur van de bestsellers 'Het maakbare brein' en 'IK2'.

**Wouter de Jong** is dé snelrijzende ster op het gebied van effectiviteit en persoonlijk leiderschap. Zijn programma's zijn interactief, vol humor en bevatten veel momenten van persoonlijke inzichten.

Dagvoorzitter **Jan van Setten** is expert in gedragsverandering en (persoonlijk) leiderschap. Jan heeft een grote impact als spreker door zijn aangenaam confronterende stijl met humor en energie. Niemand gaat de zaal uit zonder een nieuw inzicht of idee.

NOOIT MEER  
TE DRUK